

Reviewed work: **R. G. Collingwood: *An Autobiography and other writings: with essays on Collingwood's life and work***. Eds David Boucher and Teresa Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

R. G. Collingwood has always been discovered by different readers by different routes. Many make the acquaintance first through *The Idea of History*, while those coming from the direction of philosophy of science typically arrive at *The Idea of Nature*. But of all his works it is *An Autobiography* that offers the best general introduction to Collingwood: to his thought as a whole, to his political philosophy, and to his personality as a writer. It is above all the story of Collingwood's thought, and has naturally been compared in this regard to the *Confessions* of Augustine and Rousseau, to Croce's *Autobiography*, and to John Ruskin's *Praeterita*. Ruskin explained that the subject of his autobiography were those things that gave him pleasure to remember. There is a good dose of this in Collingwood's *Autobiography* (originally published in 1939), except that much of what gives him pleasure to think of are the philosophical battles he fought when he was younger, and those to which he might still have time to contribute at time of writing. A chief difference between the two is that Ruskin seems, by this late point in his life, to be writing for himself and for those already aware of what he has had to say – which, indeed, might have been the cause of some readers coming to think him morose. Collingwood, on the other hand, writes for a general reading public which might know nothing of him, and little of philosophy. So it is by this standard – the great introductory quality of *An Autobiography* – that any new edition should be measured.

In this new edition the main text itself has been reproduced from the first and all subsequent editions. Collingwood specialists will be glad that the original pagination has thus been preserved (though they might also notice that the sharpness of the type has degenerated in the process), while casual readers' enjoyment of Collingwood's writing is allowed to proceed unmolested by the voices of subsequent editorial intruders. (There are no new footnotes.) Thereafter this new edition is radically different from previous ones, which have typically been slender and inexpensive, sometimes with a brief introduction – and, in the 1970s and 80s, usually produced in paperback. This 600-page, 'Bible-sized' hardback is luxuriantly dust-jacketed, with the inside covers romantically lined with a reproduction of Collingwood's own map of the East Indies' steamship routes as they were in 1937 (see below).

More importantly, the 167 pages of *An Autobiography* are outweighed by 270 pages of commentary on it (300 if the editors' introduction is included). It is always bold to publish a definitive edition of a 'classic' text – a text which has been continuously discussed during the decades which it apparently survives – in which the text itself is forever tied to what will quickly become historical 'snapshots' of the latest achievements in recent scholarship. But in this case the marriage is, I think, a happy one, because the all-important 'introductory' quality of the text has been augmented with what amounts to an accessible introduction to Collingwood scholarship: its various branches, and its main (living) figures, numbering Jan van der Dussen, Bruce Haddock, Rex Martin, David Boucher, and James Connelly among others – each introducing in his commentary his own specialist area of focus, its manifestation in *An Autobiography* (and *An Autobiography's* importance in it).

Collingwood the political theorist is what he would call a 'gloves-off' philosopher, and *An Autobiography* is a significantly political work. The fond memoirs of its opening chapters may evoke the rosy Victorian country life of a multi-talented Lakeland family, but the tone of its

conclusion, decades later (and on the brink of the Second World War), is militantly principled: 'I know that all my life I have been engaged unawares in a political struggle, fighting against these things in the dark', Collingwood writes. 'Henceforth I shall fight in the daylight.' The range of social and political subjects dealt with in *An Autobiography* is naturally not as great as in *The New Leviathan*, which ambitiously claims to 'update' Hobbes, and it is a great deal more timely in its framing. But still, in his account of British democracy, and in his critique of the politicians who (in his view) had betrayed it to fascism, Collingwood deploys the same combination of tidy reasoning and well-aimed rhetorical force familiar to readers of his other (later) work. Lloyd George and the *Daily Mail* are, for instance, 'landmarks in the corruption of the electorate'. *An Autobiography*'s final chapter presents a healthy specimen of what we might today call 'muscular liberalism' – 'liberal', Collingwood explains, in the sense in which it is meant 'on the Continent'.

David Boucher, whose *Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood* (1989) remains the classic study of the subject, has taken the opportunity afforded by this new edition to comment on the political thought of *An Autobiography* specifically. His chapter, 'Collingwood and European Liberalism', explores Collingwood's understanding of liberalism through examination of some of the figures who (Boucher argues) inspired him in the years preceding his writing the *Autobiography*: as well as the Italian names that customarily feature in discussions of Collingwood, Boucher provides a very interesting examination of José Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno.

Loosely these commentaries follow the themes of *An Autobiography* in the order in which they occur in the text itself, and consciously provide new scholars with valuable signposts to the current literature. It is worth highlighting James Connelly's commentary, which is particularly valuable in this regard. Connelly introduces the main 'controversies' surrounding *An Autobiography* and Collingwood's thought more broadly, the controversies upon which the majority of Collingwood scholarship has been centred. They are namely: (1) Collingwood's relations to other thinkers past and contemporary, and whether he was an 'idealist'; (2) the claim that his later thought evinces a 'radical conversion'; (3) his alleged 'relativism'; (4) his alleged 'socialism'; (5) what he meant by insinuating an association between 'realism' and fascism; and (6), in philosophy of history, his 'doctrine of re-enactment' and his alleged 'methodological individualism'.

Jan van der Dussen has done something similar with his chapter regarding Collingwood's philosophy of history, which he uses to identify and explore the much-discussed 'logic of question and answer' as set out in chapter five of *An Autobiography*, and which, Dussen (rightly) says, is the foundation of Collingwood's philosophy of history. Dussen does not limit his analysis to *An Autobiography*, though. His 'signposting' points mostly to those parts of *The Idea of History* that discuss the well-known 're-enactment doctrine', and above all to *The Principles of History* – the unfinished treatise written during Collingwood's 1938–39 travels, and published in 1999 as edited and introduced by van der Dussen with W. H. Dray. (Unfortunately, for all his signposting, van der Dussen has been too modest to mention his own formidable 1981 study of Collingwood, *History as a Science*, of which no student of Collingwood's philosophy of history should be ignorant.)

The new editors' introduction explains the biographical context of *An Autobiography*'s writing and publication, and then analyses its method, conception, and possible influences in the genre. It also contains a good deal about Collingwood's life, as does the first commentary by

Teresa Smith (Collingwood's daughter), which takes as its specific focus Collingwood's childhood and the 'habits of thought' he inherited from his early education.¹

It seems appropriate that biographical studies of Collingwood, when published outside of the specialist journal (now *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*), should be presented alongside Collingwood's own work on the subject. And indeed there is an academic political matter at work here which most readers will be unaware of. In 2009 Fred Inglis published *History Man: The Life of R. G. Collingwood* (Princeton University Press) with the intention of transmitting Collingwood, 'life-and-work', as a 'line of force' into the present and future (p. 138). Inglis's biography has not, though, been warmly received by the Collingwood research community. Peter Johnson has called *History Man* 'a work which gives Collingwood exactly the kind of scrutiny that, one suspects, he would have welcomed least'.¹ Among other possible complaints, Inglis might have dealt a little indelicately with the subject of Collingwood's personal relationships (see pp. 183–4, 219, 289–91, 304 for example), his illness (pp. 237, 247), and he may not have been quite careful enough with personal and professional research etiquette. This new edition of *An Autobiography* might be regarded as a response on the part of the Collingwood 'establishment' to Inglis's treatment of Collingwood's life: a response based on the reassertion of Collingwood's own principle: the story of a philosopher's life is the story of his thought.

One curious editorial decision concerns the omission of Collingwood's original preface which, although only very short, does contain certain important statements, the value of which is amply demonstrated by the fact that they continue to be discussed – including in the commentaries contained in this new volume (see pp. 213, 399–401). These statements – 'The autobiography of a man whose business is thinking should be the story of his thought'; 'an autobiography has no right to exist unless it is *un livre de bonne foi*'; 'my rule in writing books is never to name a man except *honoris causa*' – are surely important if the reader is to understand the autobiographical text as Collingwood intended him to. At least, Collingwood obviously thought them so. Neither is Stephen Toulmin's excellent introduction to the 1972 edition included – even though it too is mentioned more than once (pp. xxi, 391n.40). Meanwhile the index to the 1978 edition *has* been reproduced, even though its contents have been incorporated into the new main index.

Also included in this edition is Collingwood's *Log* of his journey to, around, and back from the East Indies in 1938–1939, and a letter sent from Bali to his sister. Although it is really an example of Collingwood's 'noting' rather than his 'writing', the *Log* still offers some insight on Collingwood's approach to his work – and, indeed, his approach to the world in general. Although in many ways a very intimate document, the *Log* is not as rich a guide to Collingwood's voyage as Wendy James's commentary, 'A philosopher's journey: Collingwood in the East Indies'. James's account is greatly more readable, and now stands as the best treatment of the subject yet written.

¹ See also Teresa Smith, 'R. G. Collingwood: 'This Ring of Thought': Notes on Early Influences', *Collingwood Studies* 1 (1994), 27–43

- i *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (05.10.2009). Johnson is perhaps a little unkind. Well-meaning biographers can be far clumsier than Inglis. *Some Sort of Genius*, a biography of Collingwood's fellow Rugbeian, Wyndham Lewis, opens with two particularly mawkish pages of neuroscientific narrative, apparently introducing the protagonist's special powers of observation through the brain disorder that eventually blinded and killed him.